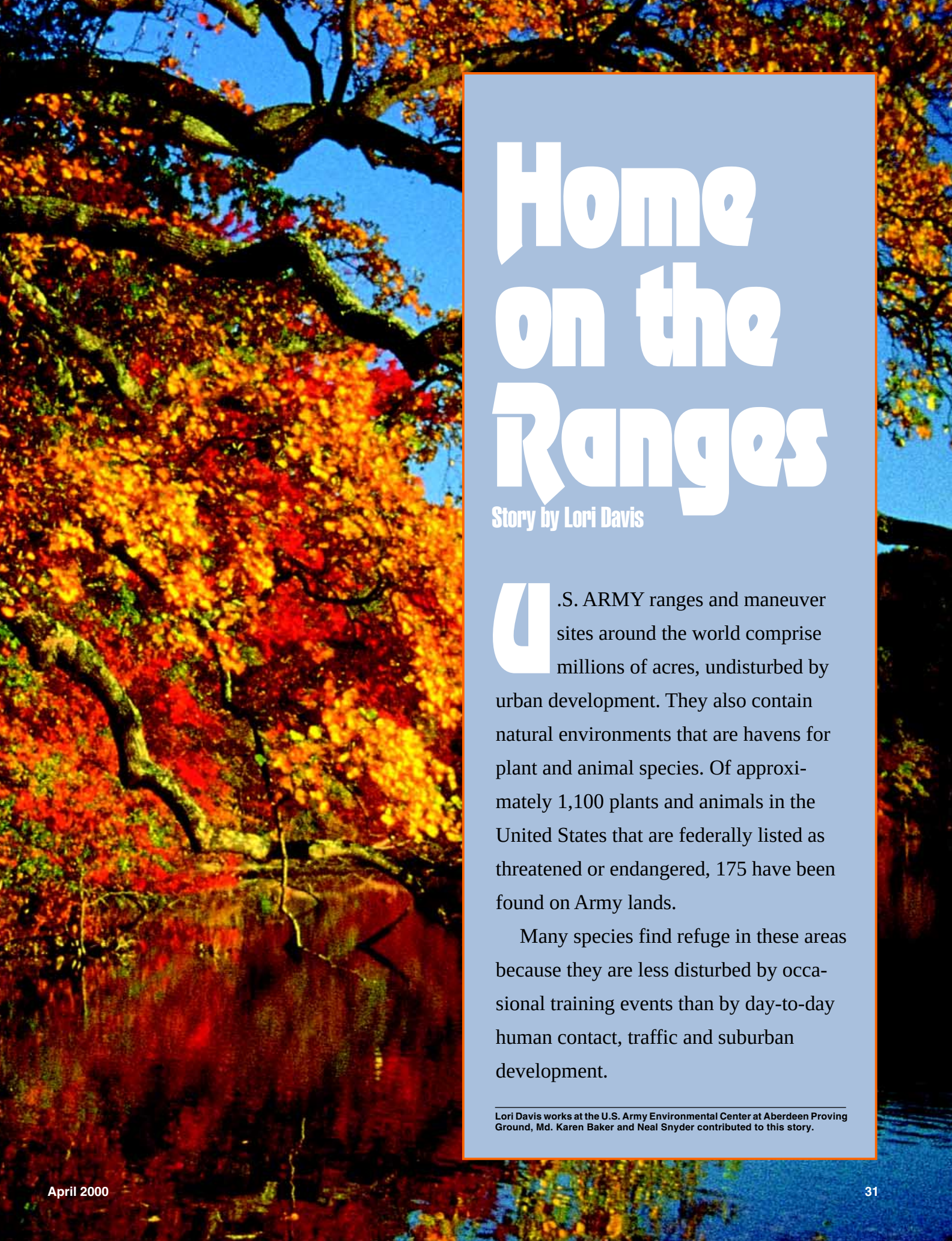

Home on the Ranges

Story by Lori Davis

U.S. ARMY ranges and maneuver sites around the world comprise millions of acres, undisturbed by urban development. They also contain natural environments that are havens for plant and animal species. Of approximately 1,100 plants and animals in the United States that are federally listed as threatened or endangered, 175 have been found on Army lands.

Many species find refuge in these areas because they are less disturbed by occasional training events than by day-to-day human contact, traffic and suburban development.

Lori Davis works at the U.S. Army Environmental Center at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Md. Karen Baker and Neal Snyder contributed to this story.

Supporting the Environment

AT installations in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Maryland, and at many more around the world, the Army is working diligently to merge conservation with readiness.

"The Army manages an aggressive program for the conservation and recovery of federally listed species and other natural resources," said Scott Belfit, wildlife biologist for the U.S. Army Environmental Center's Conservation Branch. "A key objective is to eliminate or minimize potential adverse impacts of habitat-conservation efforts on the quality and realism of soldier training. Installation biologists work closely with trainers to develop win-win solutions to land management issues whenever possible."

Gray Wolves and the National Guard

RESEARCH into the effects of military maneuvers on gray wolves has pushed a Minnesota National Guard training site to the forefront of a debate on how the state will manage the species once it is removed from Minnesota's threatened species list.

Since a pack of gray wolves appeared at Camp Ripley in 1994, the post's environmental staff has tracked the pack's movements, planning training activities so that heavy artillery maneuvers would not harm the animals.

The environmental staff fitted three wolves with special collars equipped with Global Positioning System tracking devices to collect data about their movements. Camp Ripley's environmental supervisor, Marty Skoglund, says GPS data is key to making training decisions.

"We knew, for example, where these animals were in proximity to 200 soldiers and a convoy of Bradley fighting vehicles assembled in one area," Skoglund said.

Surprisingly, the GPS data revealed that the wolves seemed unaffected by much of the soldier activity on the installation, he said.

As a result of their work, Camp Ripley's environmental staff was invited by Minnesota environmentalists to serve on a committee that gave advice on gray wolf management, in anticipation of the animal's removal from the threatened species list.

"There's a wolf controversy now — should they be hunted or protected?" Skoglund said. "Our research is actually playing into the decisions on how wolf management is going to work."

Tracy Brooks, USFWS

Butterflies and Wildflowers

IN 1990 sightings of the Karner blue butterfly were decreasing. When nature observers found the Karner blue on ranges at Fort McCoy, Wis., post ecologists mobilized to protect the insect.

The Karner blue's decline was particularly sharp in the urbanized east area of the fort, where lawns and shopping malls have largely eradicated lupine, a wildflower that is the only food source for the Karner larva. The loss of habitat and resulting decrease in Karner blue numbers edged the species toward the federal endangered-species list, said Tim Wilder, Fort McCoy's endangered-species biologist.

Fort McCoy launched a four-year project in 1991 to find both wild lupine and the Karner blue, and began crafting a management plan to protect the butterfly and its habitat. Between 1991 and 1997, volunteers and environmental staff put in almost 31,000 hours mapping Karner blue habitat and determining the effects of fire and mechanical disturbance on the insect and its food source.

Wilder said the use of the land for training — including brush removal and the slight disturbance of the sandy soil — actually helps create suitable growing conditions for lupine, improving the butterfly's habitat. In this case, training activities assist in species recovery.

Wilder is in charge of preserving 20 or so species found on various federal and state endangered lists and frequently offers advice that helps units modify their training plans to lessen impacts on these species. With proper planning, soldiers "could train and not even know there was an endangered species in the area," he said.

Steve Farrel, USFWS

Watching Eagles Soar

THANKS to careful management and creating protected breeding areas, the American bald eagle is flourishing at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Md.

As its habitat shrank and pesticides such as DDT thinned its eggshells to the point of breaking under the weight of a nesting female, the eagle population dropped perilously in all parts of the country. Although DDT was banned in 1971 and greater effort was placed on conserving land for breeding grounds, the numbers of America's national bird remained low. Environmental experts at APG counted only 15 eagles in 1983, said Jim Pottie, a post fish-and-wildlife biologist.

Pottie said that in the past 16 years that number has climbed above 160 because Aberdeen established a 1-kilometer buffer zone around each nesting bird to prevent human interference from January through May.

By giving the environmental office details on their plans, trainers and testers lay the groundwork for reducing environmental impacts before anyone goes to the range, Pottie said.

"It's all a matter of coordination and goodwill," he said. "You have to make the management plan available and give people the information they need. People are more aware of the environment today, and they want to do the right thing." □